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The Minimum Competency Movement

Chairman's Report
Massachusetts Advisory Council for the
Right to Read Effort

November, 1978

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Preface

This attempt to uncover the bare bones of the competency testing controversy and to relate our findings to the less rigid and less intimidating body of Right to Read ideology was urged upon me by the Massachusetts State Director, Dr. Joseph J. Tremont. I could not easily refuse. As Chairman of a State Advisory Council temporarily in limbo this year as Right to Read grows a new administrative skin and acquires an updated federal name — Basic Skills and Quality Education — *I could hardly plead overwork or lack of concern.*

Nor could I beg off on the grounds of being neither a reading specialist nor a professional designer of tests. This particular reform movement seems to be largely a layman's, a taxpayer's, a parent's fight, not an inkhorn skirmish between competing schools of reading and testing research.

Still more persuasive was being assured that all I had to do was put things together, that the real work had already been done for me. And so it had. Mr. Edward Sacco, a member of the Advisory Council who is also a reading specialist serving in the Watertown Public Schools, had collected all the official documents on the subject as well as other materials representing a fair spectrum of opinion. He had even composed an outline. As a final inducement, Dr. Tremont promised to go over my text and protect me from the more egregious signs in print of ignorance or naiveté. I am most grateful to them both for their lion's share of the work and above all for sharing the responsibility for accuracy in substance and fact.

As for the style and ambivalence of tone, the mixture of determined hope and somewhat frightened and hence possibly too preachy worry and impatience, these I dare to think are closer than not to the ordinary citizen's state of mind. In any case, as Touchstone said of his ragged sweetheart Audrey in As You Like It, *they are "a poor thing but mine own."*

Our excuse for adding yet another booklet to the growing pile on competency testing is the hope that by its directness it may persuade those still unaware of the pile or perhaps intimidated by more strictly professional or political or sociological or administrative treatments of the subject that it is a matter they too

should give serious thought to. And having so thought, if they are persuaded to act out, day by day, a renewed commitment to learning and teaching — that is, to exercising, improving, and sharing with others those marvelous symbolic skills of communication that make us human — we will all come closer to our ideal of competence.

Jean H. Slingerland

November, 1978.

Introduction

In many states minimum competency testing programs have been legislatively mandated, and resultant programs are either already in place or are well along in the planning stages. Within a few years students in some of these states will be required to show, by passing competency tests, that they have met minimum standards in certain basic skills in order to receive a high school diploma.

The impetus for legislation dealing with defining and testing the achievement of minimum skills in reading, writing, and mathematics derives from two kinds of general public dissatisfaction with our schools. One is of an intellectual kind; the other is located not in the head but in the pocketbook. Parents and taxpayers in increasingly vocal numbers are indignant over high schools which graduate students lacking the most basic literary and computational skills and complain in the same breath of what looks to them like little correlation between educational expenditures and substantial academic gains. Graphs of taxes and school budgets continue to go up; indices to scholastic competence continue to go down. Hence the new cry — no longer for "more" and "newer" but for "better" and "basic." At no additional expense, indeed on a dieted budget, citizens are telling their congressmen they insist on better teaching, better learning, and better mastery of more clearly predetermined fundamental skills.

The means to this more narrowly focussed intellectual goal for education is only obliquely stated and may not always be clearly perceived by the passionately reform-minded layman. What it comes down to is a much tougher kind of accountability — tougher on students *and* tougher on teachers. The first step, as these citizen-parents and taxpayers see it, is to set minimum standards and then to police the progress towards meeting them. Hence minimum competency tests. And a new banner is raised under which to shelter perennial hopes that education can be made less a chancy business and more a scientifically verifiable one.

Those in favor of the minimum competency movement argue that, by setting more or less absolute statewide if not national standards, students and teachers, threatened by unambiguous criteria for academic failure or success, will be inspired to more

concentrated and productive efforts. If, as someone defined it, the art of teaching resides in a nice balance between the carrot and the stick, these folks seem to be for giving up the carrot and dusting off the stick. "Nothing," they might argue with the no-nonsense Sam Johnson, "so concentrates the mind as the prospect of hanging."

Opponents of the movement, among them large numbers of prominent professional educators, are alarmed at the prospect their practical imaginations paint for them. They see unpleasant confrontations ahead at all levels as teachers, students, parents, and administrators face all the "problems" large and small that a sudden change in ideology and practice will thrust upon them. They are suspicious of legislators' motives and of their haste in responding to the public clamor. They are full of doubts and fears about the humanity and indeed the social prudence of eliminating or even curtailing such egalitarian procedures as "social promotion" and "special" or "alternative" courses of study. They suspect that public interest in competency testing programs is being exploited for purposes of political expediency and in such haste as to ignore the social, financial, and curricular implications of the movement. And they are anxious about the effect on schools and on school budgets of legislative mandates which seem to call for almost instant substantive change in matter and method. They urge caution and delay, enough time, at least, for preliminary pilot programs and evaluations. They emphasize the cost of testing programs and the even more daunting cost of the massive remediation which test results will most surely show to be necessary.

The more one is informed on minimum competency testing in reading and in the other basic skills, the less one is inclined to rush into advocacy or opposition. First one must try to see as clearly as possible just what the components of competency testing programs are and, in the light of all for and against arguments, think about what they might better be. One must try to anticipate the possible pitfalls as well as the possible advantages to such programs. One must weigh the arguments of proponents and opponents in the light of their special interest as well as of their special experience. Finally one must bravely make the kind of judgment educators are perennially called upon to make — a judgment that takes into account not only the all too clear risks of failure but also the painful admission of past mistakes and the evergreen hope that by reforming our ways we certainly

can do a better job in our schools.

In the following sections of this paper we shall try to present the evidence necessary for the reader to arrive at his own judgment as we describe and report the status of the minimum competency movement in this country and in Massachusetts and the arguments which have come to our attention either in our official Right to Read capacity or as citizen-followers of the general press. We will conclude by relating minimum competency in its most hopeful aspects to the familiar ideology of the Right to Read Effort and by criticizing what seems simpleminded or excessive in the movement as it is presently being discussed and implemented.

The Minimum Competency Movement

Practitioners in the field of education, those most likely to read this report, will not be troubled by the lack of a firm and agreed-upon definition of "minimum competency testing." These readers will have been habituated through years of service on educational committees to the problems of definition in a field where there is no consensus even as to whether what we are engaged in is a science or an art. And even if we had such consensus, the question of how to define science and art so as fairly to distinguish them without denying their areas of overlap is still very much an open one. Meanwhile we must bear with the frustration of trying to be precise enough in speaking of goals and methods so that from school system to school system we can understand one another, even while we come up at every point against the slipperiness of catch-phrases. These inevitably come into play as we try to assimilate ideal goals to the describable, quantifiable, and replicable acts we call "programs" or "implementations."

With "competency testing" the problem is particularly acute. The phrase, a typical piece of educational jargon, came into popular and highly emotional currency in the press and also in the legislatures of a number of states almost simultaneously. In at least some of these circles the phrase is used glibly and almost automatically without knowledge of its original, very modest and limited claims to educational value. It is quite possible that different state legislatures, in whose proceedings the phrase has

had much recent prominence, use the same words while understanding quite differently what they mean to imply by them for educational reform. Certainly there has been a common urge to "do something" about school standards and the level of students' achievement. But common ground when it comes to what that something ought to be is harder to discern. For over two years now most states have been wrestling with definitions of "basic skills," "competency," and the relation of these to socially as well as intellectually competent adulthood. While this goes on, the best one can do by way of a definition is to say that minimum competency testing "is" what greatly differing state-level actions say it is.

A survey informs us that, as of September, 1977, 32 states have some form of minimum competency testing and that of these states 12 call in the near future for making the high school diploma contingent upon meeting a minimum competency standard.[1] No two states, however commonly and simultaneously they perceived the public concern, have taken identical action. In some a strongly centralized approach has led to enacting prescriptive standards; others have passed legislation giving only guidelines to local districts and making them responsible for curricular design, implementation, and testing. From state to state there is variation at every level: definition, legislation, testing, implementation. There is, however, a noticeable trend towards being more specific about the matters to be incorporated into legislation and a greater tendency to defer action pending the study of pilot programs and further analysis.

The political desire not to miss the boat of grass roots demand confronts the prudent desire to wait and see what other states come up with and how their formulas are implemented and publicly accepted. Because most state programs are still in the stages of planning and gradual implementation, progress reports in terms of test results and the impact on school programs or on senior high school students are too scanty to be meaningful.

Massachusetts Policy on Minimum Competency

In March, 1976, the State Department of Education in Massachusetts set up an Advisory Committee on High School Graduation Requirements. After studying the issues, the group made

the following tentative six recommendations in June, 1977:

1. The Massachusetts Board of Education should establish minimum competency standards in communications (i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing), and mathematics and require all public school districts to implement a program of competency assessment in these subjects.
2. The competency tests should be authorized and approved by the Department of Education. This recommendation affords public school districts several options: using tests developed by the Department of Education; developing their own tests or purchasing tests from a publisher; developing their own tests by drawing upon a pool of items available through the Department of Education.
3. The Massachusetts Department of Education should establish for statewide and uniform use the pass/fail cut-off points on competency tests.
4. The Massachusetts Department of Education should require school districts to administer their tests in grades 8 or 9, and students who pass at this time should not be required to take them again. Students who fail should be provided appropriate instruction in the failed skills and should retake comparable forms of the failed tests until they achieve passing grades.
5. The Massachusetts Department of Education should make meeting the statewide standards for competency a requirement for graduation.
6. All students, except those with certain special learning and language disabilities, should be required to take and pass competency tests before graduation.[2]

The Advisory Committee then proceeded to set up regional workshops for explaining these six recommendations. Finally, they assigned the matter of spelling out standards and performance indicators to subcommittee task forces on reading, writing, listening, speaking, and mathematics.

The Advisory Committee submitted final recommendations to the Board of Education on May 23, 1978. These were the basis for the Board's *Policy on Basic Skills Improvement* adopted August 29, 1978. This policy has received the general support of the following associations: the Massachusetts Association of School Committees; the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents; the Massachusetts Association of Secondary School Principals; the Massachusetts Association of Elementary

School Principals. The overall purpose of the policy is to improve in the public schools of Massachusetts students' attainment of competency in basic skills; the immediate goal is to diagnose students' difficiencies in basic skills and to modify the curriculum in ways appropriate to correcting these deficiencies.

It should be noted that neither the general purpose nor the immediate goal proceeds from the desire merely to establish a new condition for high school graduation. The Massachusetts Board of Education is not agitated in the direction of reform because the high school diploma does not certify certain absolute academic achievements but because, diploma or no diploma, students should not leave school without being able to do the reading, writing, and figuring required of reasonably independent adults in this Commonwealth.

As a result of the Board's deliberations, the following plan of action and particular provisions were mandated:

1. The school committee of each district will be responsible for setting, by September, 1980, minimum standards for basic skills competency and for deciding by which grade level these standards should be attained and how attainment will be measured. At the elementary level these standards, which are to mainly emphasize communication and mathematical skills, shall be set by the local school committee. At the secondary level these standards shall be no less demanding than those recommended by the State Advisory Committee on High School Graduation Requirements.
2. Provisions must be made by district school committees for public participation in arriving at the above decisions.
3. Tests used at the secondary level must be approved by the State Department of Education.
4. Test results including the number and percentage of students who have failed to meet the standards shall be reported to the public and the State Board of Education.
5. Exceptions from the overall plan for periodic testing and from meeting the competency standards by the time of graduation are made for bilingual students and candidates for Chapter 766 programs.[3]

Hazards Related to Minimum Competency

The pitfalls given below are those which past experience shows to be inherent in educational program development on a wide scale. While they occur at different levels of planning, implementation, and public acceptance, all are important to anticipate and be on guard against.[4]

1. Raising expectations of success while minimizing the effort required.
2. Failing to build support at the grassroots level.
3. Setting overly optimistic timelines for achievement of goals.
4. Emphasizing testing over teaching because testing is easier than teaching.
5. Minimizing or overlooking inadequate resources when endorsing and calling for program modification.
6. Neglecting more important objectives such as curricular reform out of one-eyed enthusiasm for what is currently fashionable.
7. Rushing to treat the symptoms of educational disease without first making sure of the causes.
8. Allowing the testing program to constrict the curriculum rigidly.
9. Encouraging students', parents' and teachers' long-held (and, until recently, deliberately cultivated) expectations of success, self-esteem, parity among peers, and general pleasantness all around from start to finish in the business of schooling.
10. Assuming that a generally conceived program legislated at the state level will be happily, easily, and successfully implemented in all local educational communities.
11. Evaluating students for graduation or teachers for performance in terms of an untried program.
12. Allowing insufficient time for developing the components of a new program: standards, tests, curriculum revisions, pilot programs.
13. Underestimating the expense of making extensive changes in the curriculum.

Mr. Paul Parks, Massachusetts' Secretary of Education, has recently expressed deep concern about competency testing:

> The burden of failure, to the extent that failure is allowed, will be borne primarily by students in poor school districts and by students from minority and/or disadvantaged homes and communities. Placing the burden of failure on these students will serve no substantive educational purpose, but instead will only add to the already tragic proportions of the existing high school drop-out problem. Because I believe the promise of minimal competency testing is illusory, and the reality harmful rather than helpful, I strongly oppose the adoption of such testing programs as a prerequisite for promotion or graduation.[5]

William Spady of the National Institute of Education anticipates that minimum competency testing will fail to produce the desired improvement in basic skills for the following reasons. The movement makes no claim of including any new techniques for improving teaching and learning. Success in learning depends on whether individual students voluntarily adopt for themselves the goals desired, and the motivation to improve cannot be legislated. Due to political contraints and pressures, the tests will end up being so easy they won't tell much in the long run.[6]

John Ryor, President of the National Education Association, was reported by the *Boston Globe* of March 3, 1978, as reaffirming the NEA's call for a moritorium on competency testing. He feels it probably will create more social problems than it solves.

A special by Wayne Reilly to *The Christian Science Monitor,* November 28, 1978, "Competency Based Instruction Advances," quotes Arthur Wise (in *Rich Schools, Poor Schools,* a book on school finances), as denying the validity of the movement's basic assumptions, i.e., that legislation will solve the ". . . far more complicated problem" that "some students don't learn very well and some teachers don't teach very well." The unconfronted basic problem, he believes, is that "we don't have enough knowledge to do a better job. As a society we have been so far unwilling to invest our resources to solve that problem."

In a summary that accompanies the Reilly article are audaciously stated the usually unmentionable reasons which lurk behind more delicately or euphemistically phrased opposition arguments. Opponents to minimum competency, the author writes, feel the use of tests is a simplistic approach to complex problems such as student alienation and teacher incompetency. Moreover, these opponents also feel that minimum competency tests discriminate against minorities and the handicapped and

ignore the fact of individual differences among students.

Kenneth Goodman, whose opinion is one of three published in a 1978 pamphlet issued by the International Reading Association, speaks of

> . . . the poverty of logic behind the attempt to solve fundamental problems through legislatively mandated competencies. In such attempts competency is equated with test performance, the curriculum is narrowed and totally dominated by the tests . . . there is no seeking of causes, no concern for analyzing problems, no applications of research or theory, no new solutions.7

The other two opinions expressed in this pamphlet, by Roger Farr and Jack Cassidy respectively, are entitled "The Potential Misuse of Tests" and "Minimum Competency Programs — How?" The former presents anticipated problems; the latter proposes preventive guidelines for minimizing them.

In a September, 1977, report on *Basic Communications Skills,* the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents significantly qualified their general support for minimum competency testing. Based on their premise (an honest representation of educational ideology in recent years), that mastery must be defined in terms of an individual's potential, they oppose a single statewide standard at the high school level for proficiency in basic skills.[8]

In an article by Anderson and Lesser the writers try to point out what the implementation costs of mandated minimum competency testing programs will mean to local school systems. Particularly costly, they insist, will be the massive remediation necessary to deal with the large percentages of examinees who will probably fail competency tests.[9]

Making Minimum Competency Work

A survey of pronouncements by officials and professional groups given in the foregoing may perhaps leave the reader with the impression that those who have most clearly made up their minds are those who want no part of minimum competency. It is also tempting to conclude that the most assured doom-sayers are those who stand farthest away on a day-to-day basis from the youngster sitting at a school desk or puzzling over undecipherable school books at the kitchen table or even lounging idly on

a street corner. In any case, in order to give proponents of competency testing equal time with these others, one must turn to voices which by reason of their numbers if not their individual professional prestige are most surely getting the ear of legislators. These, classroom teachers, administrators, and college professors of education may not yet be ready to give 100% endorsement to minimum competency, but in the meantime, they are giving something even more useful. They are soberly thinking about how to make competency testing work; how to make it a part of an improved, more carefully staged, and regularly checked-up-on program of teaching which begins but does not end with fundamental skills.

Out of this more positive kind of thinking, the kind that seriously anticipates where things can go wrong but with the purpose of erecting proper safeguards, emerges a less emotional and more helpful kind of literature. Records of this thinking and deliberating, duly circulated, are laying what we hope will be a sturdy foundation for the reformed educational structure now in blueprint stage. This thinking is usually expressed as "concerns." Out of these "concerns" come "recommendations." These are often labeled "plans of action." In such slow but steady ways do conscientious educators sneak up on the painful process of admitting sins of omission and commission and set about the process of penance and reform.

Underneath the language of planning, however, something really important is going on in minds not exclusively concerned with how change will affect their work hours or budgets or relations with their public. There is a rethinking of the truly fundamental questions: What is it to teach and to learn? What is the administrator's function? Who is responsible for what? Who is accountable to whom? And what are basic skills worth in the long as well as the short run? These questions rise up to be addressed every time a new reform movement in education startles us out of old comfortable habits. The illusiveness of the answers tease our minds into using mental muscles hardened into the stock ideas and unexamined assumptions that we may simply have accepted as the givens of our immediate work place. If this is so, then the label "controversial," which has become a fixed epithet for the minimum competency movement, is a good sign for education, not a bad one.

Of great concern to those who will be implementing minimum competency testing is the program of instruction to be developed

for regular students and also the program of remediation for those who fail to meet the tests' standards. For these instructional programs to be effective the following guidelines are offered.

1. Tests used to measure minimum competency must meet the requirement for test validity, i.e., the tests must measure what they purport to measure.
2. Students must be taught the skills and kinds of knowledge which the tests call for, and remedial instruction must begin as soon as students show they have fallen behind in their progress towards mastery of basic skills.
3. As students do not all learn at the same rate and mastery is a function of "time on task," while virtually all students can make progress, the time required varies individually.
4. The instructional presentation of the content or skills to be learned should take into account the differing ways individual students learn most readily. Some are visual-minded, others more auditory-minded; some do better in groups than with individual tuition, and for many others the reverse is true; some thrive on a highly structured program while others need a more flexible arrangement of challenges. Many students do best when most or all of these instructional possibilities are used for variety or even for convenience.
5. Students must be given practice in applying communications and mathematical skills to practical tasks like budgeting, figuring interest on credit accounts, reckoning price-quantity ratios on groceries, reading maps and figuring gasoline consumption and mileage, estimating construction materials, following a recipe, and so on.

In anticipation of the need many children will have for considerable supplementary instruction and practice, the following ideas have been generated as possibilities other than or in addition to present standard remedial programs.

1. instructing students in how to take the test
2. setting up community-based work-study programs
3. tutoring of students by other students
4. encouraging and showing parents how to give their children supplementary home teaching
5. evaluating elective courses in terms of whether they support basic skills motivationally or substantively or simply distract or amuse the individual who is having

trouble with academic subjects

6. identifying children with learning problems early so that special teaching can be planned and carried on for a considerable period of time.[10]

Another concern, one voiced alike by proponents and opponents of minimum competency, is that the curriculum that precedes the tests be systematic, sequential, well-managed, and integrated. A minimum competency program should include instructional materials and methods that are closely related to periodic measures of progress. In fairness, until there has been enough time for schools to have offered years of adequate instruction in the requisite competencies, test-determined success or failure of students should not affect the awarding of the high school diploma.

A good management system for collecting, recording, and making available data on competency is seen as absolutely essention to a fair, comprehensive minimum competency program. This necessitates a skills hierarchy and an instructional flow chart without bypasses, a methods file, criterion-referenced testing, individual profile cards, and a data base of achievement statistics.

Finally — and most important of all — minimum competency, with its big stick component of testing, should be seen as indeed a very important part but still only *one* very important part of a comprehensive educational program. That program must also contain instruction related to the intersection of skills with individual and social life. It must also be ready to provide generous-hearted and sensitive remediation. And it must admit publicly and honestly its dependence upon all the incentives for achievement and success that parents, the community, and society at large can imaginatively and persuasively provide.

Minimum Competency and The Right to Read Effort

Of all the programs large and small federally funded in the last decade to combat illiteracy, Right to Read's prescriptions for success stand closest to the bare bones of those outlined and discussed above. The Right to Read Effort has been calling for a return to curricular fundamentalism and strict accountability ever since the New England Consortium for the Right to Read

Effort brought out its first and cornerstone publication, *Focus on Excellence.*[11]

In this booklet, Section B on "Organizing and Managing a Reading Program" lists as "exemplary" only programs which are designed for step-by-step continuous progress towards the mastery of reading skills and reading appetites. It also indicates what the components of an exemplary reading program should be: sequenced skills, criterion-referenced tests, and an accurate system for keeping student and class and school records.

Six years ago Right to Read's recipe sounded either too old-fashioned or, given the contemporary proliferation of other more socially focussed programs, too pedestrian and minimal to be thought controversial or worth media attention. *Focus on Excellence,* largely about implementation, criterion testing, record keeping, and the need for community support, seems, in retrospect, to have been somewhat before its time. This kind of practical formulization of the nitty-gritty of classroom instruction is about where professional concern is right now. Meanwhile, sensing what the next hurdle would be, the Massachusetts Right to Read Effort moved in these last two years to tackle the problem of re-educating parents, teachers, and students as to their respective responsibility in motivating a strenuous personal and societal rededication to literacy. The fruit of this work was published last January under the title *Getting Back to Reading.*[12] Perhaps this booklet will play a part, in due course, when it is recognized just how large a matter it will be to wean students, parents, and teachers from the expectations of easy and gratifying success in which they have been for too long encouraged. The implications of minimal competency are scarcely easy or gratifying, at least in the short run.

The three requisites of an excellent reading program — expanded to include writing and mathematics and embedded in the supportive school and family and community context insisted upon by Right to Read manifestos — closely follow the recommendations of the Massachusetts State Department of Education's Advisory Committee on High School Graduation. As was pointed out elsewhere in this paper, the Advisory Committee on High School Graduation was most strongly of the opinion that beginning by taking action regarding the high school diploma would be a case of *hysteron-proteron,* putting the cart before the horse, as well as being unfair. Staff efforts and school resources expended in merely eleventh-hour disciplinary threatenings

would, the Advisory Committee on High School Graduation asserted, be much better spent in developing, monitoring, and providing remedial adjuncts to a tightened-up curriculum emphasizing the basic skills from the all-important beginning to the end of formal schooling.

The Advisory Committee for High School Graduation also recommended using, all along the line, curriculum-based diagnostic achievement tests as the means of identifying at the earliest possible moment pupils in need of supplementary or remedial "time on task" and of evaluating the effectiveness of the curriculum and the teaching of it.

Such agreement is all very well, all very well, indeed, but experience over the years with what happens to irreproachable goals and high hopes in the period of implementation following a general call to arms puts a check on optimism. There is, after all, a depressing side to Right to Read's vanguard position in the matter of step-by-step methodology, criterion-referenced periodic assessment of achievement, and responsible record keeping. If we've been so smart and right these last several years, why aren't we richer, that is, why aren't the students in schools that follow the Right to Read philosophy spectacularly better achievers? Telling, it appears, is one thing; getting the job done is quite another.

All this being so, while we welcome the minimum competency movement, we welcome it in a quiet voice, with fingers crossed, and with a caveat. New slogans invite the cessation of thought quite as easily as they provoke it. There is always the tendency to confuse identifying a problem with actually solving it. Hence the crossed fingers. As for the caveat, what troubles us in the Massachusetts guidelines is the discrepancy in clarity and vigor between the language requiring students to attain minimum standards and that which relatively faintly calls for changes in the kind and quality of teaching and in the kind and quality of motivation and remediation.

We share the concern of those who find in the various states' new legislation at least the appearance of applying the stick of accountability too exclusively to the student. The unpleasant effects of competency testing, as distinct from the potentially good effects in terms of diagnosis and prompt remediation, must be fairly shared by all members of the team responsible for learning: parents, teachers, program designers and administrators, and legislators — not just the students, even though with them,

indeed, the buck stops. Students are ultimately responsible for their performance simply because, no matter how many may try to help, no one can learn for another. Yet if our schools are to be more effective in helping individual minds to master (or even be minimally competent in) the basic skills, more than the students' self-discipline and patience will be required. Their effort must be supported, in a determined and energetic and stimulative way, by that of family and school and community and nation.

Lawmakers, including Right to Read with its series of commandments to the unenlightened, cannot do it alone. Neither can advisory committees and curriculum designers, or classroom teachers, or parents, or school administrators, or educational ideologues. The only person who can, possibly, do his job alone today is the student. At the risk of weakening our argument, we are obliged to admit this. When cases of unsupported, self-taught success against all odds occur, they are student successes. This rare kind of success is not, however, strictly relevant to the matter of how to school a nation's young people.

We in Right to Read welcome minimum competency. We welcome it in the hope that it signals a rediscovery of and a re-dedication to the educational premises fundamental to individual literacy and a sound and free society. Finally, if fingers-crossed optimism may be allowed one more expression, it would choose for good luck to take off in the favorite metaphor of a man — part politician, part scientist, part dreamer of great and timely dreams — who devoted a good share of his life to *The Advancement of Learning.* Speaking of learning as the ship of discovery, Sir Francis Bacon would, we think, agree that it is not the flag or slogan that brings the ship safely to shore with its treasure. Nor is it just the sweat and blisters of the common seaman. It is the shipbuilder, the mapmaker, the meteorologist, the navigator, the sailmaker, and the engineer. Above all it is the *shared* determination to get there. It is also the shared knowledge that, if they are not to be lost, all hands at sea, they must get there *together.* They do not waste time haggling over who was most to blame for the wobbly wake all can see behind them. Their course set, they all — individually and collectively — simply roll up their sleeves and *get to work.*

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